The Fourth Church Pulpit

WORK FOR ALL TO DO

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Perhaps we should revive Luther's vision of the priesthood of all believers.... It is a vision that requires a rich and disciplined imagination ... To believe in one's own priesthood is to see the extraordinary dimensions of an ordinary life, to see the hand of God at work in the world and to see one's own hands as necessary to that work. Whether those hands are diapering an infant, assembling an automobile or balancing a corporate account, they are God's hands, claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God's will on earth.

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"To each is given the manifestation
of the Spirit for the common good."
I Corinthians 12:7 [NRSV]

On the night of April 7, 1805, Meriwether Lewis wrote an unusually eloquent and poignant journal entry. He was in his buffalo skin tepee, in the what is now central North Dakota, where the Knife River joins the Missouri. That day his tiny expedition headed into a wilderness no European American had ever seen before. A large keel boat, which has served to carry supplies, weapons, ammunition, food and a secure place from attack, was turned around and sent back down the river to St. Louis. The little band would head for the Pacific Ocean alone.

Lewis wrote:

> "Our vessels consisted of six small canoes (and two larger row boats). This little fleet, altho' not quite so rispectable (*sic*) as those of Columbus, or Captain Cook, were still viewed by us with as much pleasure as those disernedly (sic) famed adventures ever suffered theirs: and I dare say with as much anxiety for their safety and preservation. We were now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized men had never trodden: the good or evil it had in store for us was for experience to determine, and these little vessels contained every article by which we were to expect to subsist or defend ourselves."

And then Lewis became reflective, writing by candle light in his tepee on the edge of the unknown:

> "The picture which now presented itself to me was a most pleasing one, entertaining as I do, the most confident hope of succeading (sic) in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the last ten years, I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life." [Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, New York, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1996, p. 212]

Lewis should, however, have been scared to death. It is hard to imagine a more fragile or vulnerable project. What impressed me about his journal entry is its expression of pleasure. Lewis was happy watching all visible means of support, all security, all contact with the world, sail down the river. It's almost as if he knew that it was the defining moment in his life: a convergence of huge dynamics — his particular gifts, and a specific situation, a need, a challenge, which required his gifts. It's almost as if Lewis knew that his being there, leading the exploring party into the new Louisiana Purchase on behalf of Thomas Jefferson and the American government was why he had been born, the very purpose of his life. It's almost as if Lewis knew, in that moment of radical abandonment, radical trust, knew his calling, his vocation. "I could esteem this moment as among the most happy of my life."

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It is one of the most intriguing ideas in Christian religion. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good," Paul wrote to an early Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth. There is work for each to do, particular work to which God calls a person, work which requires the particular gifts and skills God has given.

Is there a more important topic for any of us than this? Is there a more critical question than knowing what one is supposed to do with one's life, knowing why we are here and what God wants us to do with our lives; or, to put it in the language of faith, is there a more important topic than identifying our vocation and then doing it?

James Fowler, Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University, thinks that this idea of Paul's that each of us has been called to some vocation is at the heart of our faith experience. "Vocation," he says, "is bigger than job or occupation or career. Vocation refers to the centering commitments and vision that shape what our lives are really about." [The Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1/7/96]

The time was, not long ago, when occupational stability characterized American life. You graduated from high school, college, or graduate school, went to work, began a career, joined a practice or a firm or company, and stayed at it for forty years or so and retired. Finding a way to earn a living was a decision made once and then lived out for four decades, whether or not it had anything to do with your vocation.

Today, people entering the work force in their twenties will change jobs at least five times on average. For many of them it will be a career as well as job change. It is not at all unusual for bankers and teachers to become ministers, for lawyers to go to medical school, for clergy to work in the health care industry. We are spending more time, energy and resources on the matter of trying to solve the vocation riddle, the question of what we're supposed to do, than ever before. Early retirement, corporate downsizing, job buyouts mean that some people are radically free in their 50s and 60s to pursue their vocation anew.

And, to this new dynamic, this new phenomenon, Christian faith brings its unique notion that there is work for each of us to do; that God calls us to a vocation.

Professor Fowler observes that we associate vocation with self-denial, self-sacrifice. Christians have simply assumed for centuries that to respond faithfully to God, the call of Jesus Christ, goes against our natural inclinations and desires — that we have to deny our own longings in order to be faithful. And, for sure, sometimes it seems that way. A friend of mine describes his ending up in ministry as God pulling him across 1,000 miles of prairie, his heels dug in, plowing up a pair of furrows from Colorado right up to the front door of McCormick Theological Seminary. Sometimes God's call is to a complete laying down of one's life, but, says Fowler, in faith even the act of ultimate self-sacrifice is transformed into an expression of something the individual wants to do in grateful response to God.

Fowler sent me back to the late Joseph Campbell, whose wonderful televised conversations with Bill Moyers became a best selling book on spirituality, *The Power of Myth*.

Campbell suggested that Christians usually get their own idea of vocation backward. It's not that God calls us to do what we don't want to do, but the very opposite. God calls us to do what we most love and long for and want to do. Pay attention to what you most deeply love. His intriguing advice was "follow your bliss ... follow your own deepest gifts, longings and leadings."

How different that is from the way we ordinarily see this matter. In the last line of Sinclair Lewis's great novel, Babbitt says: "I have never done the things that I wanted to do in all my life."

And Campbell told about over hearing a family conversation in a restaurant:

> A father sternly ordered his 12-year-old-son to drink his tomato juice.
>
> I don't want to; said the boy,
>
> "Drink it" the father commanded.
>
> "I don't like tomato juice," the boy said.
>
> "Drink it, I said."
>
> The mother interceded: "Don't make him do what he doesn't want to do."
>
> The father, now raising his voice in defense of his life principle: "He can't go through life doing what he wants to do. If he does what he wants to do, he'll be dead. Look at me: I've never done a thing I've wanted to do in all my life." [Campbell, *op.cit.*]

I have always been intrigued with St. Augustine's advice on the subject: "Love God and do what you will."

housing, stipend. I drove to Midway Airport for the interview with all the confidence of a young man who had finally resolved important issues. And the interview was a disaster. I didn't say what I meant, couldn't find the right words, after a while even found my mind wandering. It ended pleasantly enough with the interviewer's promise that after a final consultation with the committee he would get back to me. The letter arrived the next week. It seemed the committee didn't think I was right for the program. And then, a personal note. It was the opinion of the interviewer that I really didn't want this at all and that maybe I ought to continue my search for my vocation.

I can't prove it, of course, don't even like to talk about it, but my conclusion that a major part of my call — my vocation — was a series of noes, maybe even God's no, crafted in the passenger lounge at Midway Airport.

Parker Palmer wrote:

> "Every time a door closes behind us, the rest of the world opens up in front of us." [*op. cit.*, p. 22]

Frederick Buechner struggled for a long time before committing himself to his life of writing and ministry and wrote what is now my favorite definition:

> "The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." [*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, p. 118]

Did you read the article in the Tempo section of Thursday's *Chicago Tribune* about a young musician, Joe Yost, who in order to find steady work applied for a job with the Chicago Park District and was assigned to work with mentally challenged young people. The result is a singing group called "Special Music by Special People" with a new hit CD and a growing following.

One of the members of the group, Ryan, hadn't talked for years. He'd listen but not participate. Yost got him to say a Ray Charles "uh-huh" in one of the group's songs. Now he's part of the act — at the end of every four-count measures in one of the songs, Ryan adds his "uh-huh" and everybody cheers.

Mr. Yost says:

> "If someone had told me ten years ago I'd be doing this I'd tell them to get real. There are people today who think I'm crazy. But I love doing this.... I've got classmates from high school who are big-time lawyers and doctors and I'm just working for the Park District, but I wouldn't trade it. I'd rather have my fun here."

Your calling, the work God has for you to do, the project to which Jesus Christ calls you, is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

It does not necessarily mean going to seminary. It may mean making a change in what you do for a living, and how you live and it may not. It does mean to live for God, to love God first and then do what you will. It may mean just being more thoroughly who and what you are, listening to your own heart, your deepest love and strongest longing, now knowing that because you belong to God, it is what you are supposed to do.

There's work for each of us to do in the church and in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.